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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000273

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO RESURFACES AFTER SUSPICIOUS 17-DAY  
ABSENCE

REF: A. 06 MINSK 397  
[1](#)B. MINSK 262

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) President Lukashenko made a point to quell rumors about his health after a suspicious 17-day absence from the media spotlight. On March 28, a pale and balding Lukashenko appeared at a state-owned greenhouse and livestock farm and admitted to journalists that he was a bit tired, but completely healthy. In usual form, Lukashenko gave to journalists his opinion of the opposition's March 25 demonstration, Belarus' geopolitical importance to Russia, and Russia's lack of intentions to mend economic and political relations with the GOB. Although his colorful, but brash language attested to a relatively healthy Lukashenko, his extended absence is unusual and raises suspicions on his health and on the regime's state of affairs. End summary.

Lukashenko's Alive! Denies Ill Health  
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[1](#)2. (U) After not appearing in public for 17 days, a pale, perturbed-looking Lukashenko on March 28 toured a state vegetable and livestock farm in the Minsk region. It was the presidents' first public appearance since praising Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 10 while vacationing in the Russian resort Sochi. During his public absence, the presidential website claimed the president was busy "working with documents"; the same excuse the Presidential Administration (PA) used to cover up Lukashenko's illness during and after the March 2006 presidential elections (ref A). The PA subsequently cancelled his Vietnam trip (for the third time in a year) and postponed indefinitely plans for Lukashenko to meet with his Ukrainian counterpart Viktor Yushchenko. By March 25, independent news and opposition websites were already speculating that the Belarusian president suffered "another" stroke or that his mother was on her deathbed.

[1](#)3. (C) Speaking to hand-picked Belarusian and Russian journalists at the Minsk farm, the pale Lukashenko admitted he was "a bit tired," but denied suffering a heart attack, a stroke, or a combination of the two. According to Lukashenko, he was absolutely healthy and continued to play hockey regularly, despite the "extreme" conditions under which he works. Lukashenko called the rumors a fabrication on the part of the opposition. His absence was to "give people a rest" seeing his face every day, but the opposition's rumors proved that they "could not live" without Lukashenko's media presence.

14. (U) The Belarusian president praised security forces for not responding to the opposition's "blackmail attempts" during the March 25 demonstration and for maintaining law and order (ref B). Lukashenko confirmed that he received an invitation (from de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich) to participate in the event and claimed he offered the opposition the "best venues." However, the opposition decided not to hold an "orderly" demonstration and started to "walk around the city" past ambassadors who "needed a nice picture." According to Lukashenko, the opposition did not intend to demonstrate with the GOB because then the West would not give them money. He accused Western ambassadors observing the event of participating in an "illegal" demonstration and promised he would "sort things out" with the positions of those ambassadors.

"GOB's Talks With West Will Not Damage Russian Relations"

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15. (U) Lukashenko denied that Belarus' appeals to the West were not intended to damage relations with Russia. Noting that 50 percent of Belarus' trade was with the EU, the president stressed that it was necessary to build relations with the West while maintaining those with Russia. Russian relations with Belarus will improve once Russia gains "common sense." Lukashenko accused the eastern neighbor of not wanting to mend economic relations with Belarus, even after the GOB removed "all trade obstacles." Now it was up to Russia to remove their obstacles, but so far there was no "great desire" from Russia to improve economic relations.

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16. (U) The Belarusian president vowed Belarus would not use its geopolitical position or defense capabilities to blackmail its eastern neighbor, promising to honor Belarus' military commitments. He called Belarus Russia's last barrier before NATO, citing U.S. plans to install missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic and Ukraine's NATO aspirations as threats to Russia. Lukashenko hoped to speak to Putin soon to discuss defense issues and closer integration without getting "bogged down" in mutual accusations. However, Russia was to blame for the stall in union state developments, stressing that the "ball was on Russia's side of the court."

No Oligarchs or Privatization!

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17. (U) Lukashenko ruled out allowing the nomenklatura to privatize and take ownership of major industrial companies, claiming any privatization would abide by Belarusian law and be approved by him personally. He stressed that the Belarusian government was based on social justice. If GOB ministers wanted salaries like their Russian counterparts, who use their positions to become CEOs of million-dollar companies, then such GOB ministers can move to Russia. The GOB was a government of the people and oriented to socialism. Belarus will have no oligarchs and its government will not be comprised of them.

Comment

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18. (C) Part of Lukashenko's strong rule includes his daily presence in all state media outlets. Therefore, any absence from the spotlight, even for two days, raises suspicions about his health. After 17 days, Lukashenko's hair seemed grayer and thinner while his complexion and movement resembled someone suffering a hangover. However, his brash manners and colorful speech remained in tact. Although GOB officials are naturally tight-lipped about possible problems in the regime, something is clearly awry with Lukashenko

and/or in his government. For example, Lukashenko's close circle of ministers and deputies have received an unusual amount of coverage on State TV, and a few analysts with contacts in the government have told us that the loss of income from Russian energy subsidies has weakened the dictator's grip on the regime. We will follow up on these possible developments (septel).

Moore